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DR. JOHN JEFFRIES

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DR. JOHN JEFFRIES.[1]

Dr. Jeffries was the last survivor in the fifth generation from his ancestor, Mr. David Jeffries, who came from England and settled in Boston in 1677. His father, Dr. John Jeffries, who died in 1819, was a distinguished physician and surgeon in his native town of Boston, both before and after the revolutionary war, having during this latter period served in the medical department of his majesty's forces as surgeon and medical purveyor. The *New England Medical Journal* of January, 1820, contains an interesting sketch of his life.

The late Dr. Jeffries was born March 23, 1796, at his father's mansion-house in Tremont Street. He was the third son named John, and the seventh child by second marriage to an English lady named Hannah Hunt, six years after his father's final return to, and settlement in practice again in, his native town of Boston. He went to Harvard College at fifteen years of age, and was graduated in the class of 1815, which contained a number of eminent men, some of whom still survive their classmate. The medical men of his class were Drs. Joseph Baxter, William Goddard, Thaddæus W. Harris, Appleton Howe, Thomas Pratt, William Sweetser, Jonas Underwood, Samuel Webber, and Danforth Phipps Wight. Three years later he received the degree of Master of Arts from Harvard, and March, 1819, the degree of Doctor in Medicine, having studied with his father and been a pupil of those whose names are attached to his medical diploma, — Drs. James Jackson, John C. Warren, John Gorham, Jacob Bigelow, and Walter Channing. In 1825, he received an honorary degree of Doctor in Medicine from Brown University. In 1826, he became a Fellow of the Massachusetts Medical Society. He was a councilor and censor for several years, and one of the principal movers in the establishment of the district societies, having been chosen the first president of the Suffolk District Society, which office he held for three years. He was an honorary member of the New York State Medical Society and of the American Ophthalmological Society. He served the city of Boston on the Board of Consulting Physicians for several years, during which he earnestly strove for the establishment of a properly organized Board of Health. For many years previous to his death he was a member of the Consulting Board of the Massachusetts General Hospital and the City Hospital of Boston. For many years also he served on the Boylston Prize Committee of

[1] Reprinted from The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal, August 10, 1876.

Harvard University. In 1820, Dr. Jeffries married Ann Geyer, daughter of Rufus Greene and Ann Geyer Amory, of Elm Hill, Roxbury. They had eight children, six of whom, two daughters and four sons, survive him.

From a very child he grew up in the spirit and feeling of the profession. At five years of age he stood by and held the lancet for his father. Intercourse with the medical pupils in his father's house, and familiarity with almost a museum of instruments and specimens there contained, naturally shaped his training and stimulated his ambition. From the time of graduation at Harvard, in 1815, he worked incessantly in study under his father and the professors of the college, so that immediately on receiving his medical degree he was taken into partnership by his father, and thus very rapidly entered into a large and active practice, which always so pressed upon him throughout his professional life as to give him no opportunity of breaking off to follow European study, much as he appreciated its value and envied those who gained it.

His father's teaching and example gave Dr. Jeffries special interest in and knowledge of surgery. As early as 1829 he received the following offer from the late Prof. John Collins Warren, M. D.: —

Tuesday, March 24, 1829.

My Dear Sir, — Our friend Dr. Reynolds has resigned the office of assistant surgeon to the hospital. If agreeable to you, I should be glad to nominate you as his successor. Should you require any further information on the subject than what you possess, I will be at home to-morrow evening at eight o'clock, or will call on you as you may appoint.

Very truly yours, J. C. Warren.

This very complimentary offer on the part of the professor of surgery of Harvard, Dr. Jeffries was obliged to decline, as he had already undertaken a most important charitable work in connection with his still surviving friend, Dr. Edward Reynolds, namely, the establishment of an eye and ear infirmary, now known as the Massachusetts Charitable Eye and Ear Infirmary. To this charity he devoted his time and talents, exercising all his social and professional influence in its behalf. The following letter from the late Hon. John Lowell is of some interest as showing the efforts on the part of the founders of this now great charity: —

Tuesday Morning.

Dear Sir, — The statement made by you and Dr. Reynolds is very satisfactory as to the facts, and perspicuous and eloquent in its appeal to the public benevolence. I have not known a case so strongly demanding the sympathy and, of course, none having a better claim to the charity of the public, since the institution of the Massachusetts General Hospital.

I feel persuaded that it will be so received, or at least I have strong hopes that it will be. I shall as far as I have any influence encourage it by my opinions and example. I shall attend this evening, if I am not too much in-

disposed. I have been sick for some days past, and have not diminished my complaints by attending a public meeting last evening and partaking in the debates. Very truly yours, J. Lowell.

Dr. John Jeffries, Franklin Street.

Dr. Jeffries not only devoted himself to the founding and establishment of the infirmary, but he delivered courses of lectures on the eye, both theoretical and clinical, and faithfully worked for eighteen years as its surgeon, even then being most earnestly solicited by the managers, especially the late Robert G. Shaw, not to resign. When he did so he received the following testimonial of the value of his services: —

Boston, *February* 9, 1843.

John Jeffries, M. D.

Dear Sir, — I have much pleasure in conveying to you the inclosed, and remain, sir, with much respect, your obedient, humble servant,

G. H. Shaw.

"At a meeting of the managers of the Massachusetts Charitable Eye and Ear Infirmary, held on Tuesday evening the 7th of February, 1843, a letter from John Jeffries, M. D., declining a reappointment as surgeon of the infirmary having been read, it was unanimously voted, 'that the same be accepted, entered at large upon the records, and placed on file; and further, that the thanks of the managers of the Massachusetts Charitable Eye and Ear Infirmary be presented to John Jeffries, M. D., one of the original founders, and for the past eighteen years a surgeon of the institution, for his unceasing efforts for the promotion of its usefulness and prosperity, and their deep regret that his professional duties require his retirement from the institution.'

"A true copy. Attest: G. H. Shaw, *Secretary.*"

Dr. Jeffries practiced here in Boston fifty-six years. Besides his special work in ophthalmic surgery, he did a large midwifery and general practice. Long before and even after the establishment of the dispensary he was most prodigal of his physical and mental efforts among the poor of the town. It may be as truly said of him, as of his father before him, that "the poor of the town, from whom no fee could be expected, equally shared his best attentions with the richest of his patients; and if money were wanting to purchase the medicines and comforts he prescribed, it was as frequently supplied from his charitable purse." He made it a rule to give away in charity all fees obtained by his enforced professional work on Sundays. His well-known disposition was such that he was frequently imposed on during the hurried hours of office consultations, and really brought to task by the managers of the various charities as they were established in the city, which did not unfortunately harden his heart to any tale of poverty and misery. To a very large number of his patients he was physician, lawyer, and spiritual adviser, and frequently his time was called upon in the latter capacity as freely as the former. But he was ever ready to listen and help. Hardly

through the whole of his professional life did he ever sit down to a meal at his own house without interruption. To him his profession was above all things, and the care and relief of the sick and suffering his paramount duty. Yet no one more appreciated or enjoyed social engagements or family gatherings. He was a capital reader and very striking declaimer and actor. In early life he was very fond of the best plays, and many of the first actors were friends and patients of his father and himself. As far as the pressing duties of a most active life would allow, he kept himself well up with the literature of his profession, always when in his office having a book in his hand if not otherwise occupied.

Although Boston was not fifty years ago the crowded city it now is, yet Dr. Jeffries even then recognized that his family of young children needed to be out of town during the summer months, and in 1833 he built a cottage, still standing, on Noddle's Island point, when only two other houses were on what has now grown into East Boston. There he was accustomed to go on summer afternoons, and was a well-known character in his boat about the harbor and bay. But except in case of illness he never stayed away over night, always returning at nine o'clock to his house in Franklin Street, and seeing many a patient afterward. He thus got needed recreation without interruption to his professional work. Time has proved that he was right, and we see, one after another, overworked medical men forced to remove their families from the city in summer, and catch the hours when they can join them for their much-needed recreation.

Dr. Jeffries was for many years the intimate friend and confidential physician of Daniel Webster, and shared with him his love of shooting and fishing. He was with Mr. Webster through the whole of his last illness at Marshfield, and after his death built a shooting-lodge on a portion of land purchased from the estate, and then, as in former days at East Boston point, he only too infrequently sought relaxation from the fatigue of professional labor. Like his father before him, he was a most enthusiastic sportsman, but he never let this take him away from business or duty. When nearly eighty years of age, feeble and crippled by infirmities, he nevertheless insisted in going out fishing for, and catching, blue fish at Mattapoisett, where he passed his last summer.

To the medical profession he was most perfectly loyal. He always insisted on their rights, and ever strove to inculcate in the community the respect due them. He never from any motive allowed to pass, without remonstrance, fulsome praise of the licensed or unlicensed fashionable charlatan of the day. In his address at the first anniversary of the Suffolk District Medical Society, 1850, he showed that while there had been a large abatement in the public mind of that reverence with which the educated physician and his prescriptions were once regarded, yet his claims

to confidence had steadily augmented, and the profession, as a body, had never stood on so lofty an eminence for knowledge and integrity as then. In the spirit of this belief he acted from that time as long as he lived. Without anger or irritation, but with firmness and decision which carried weight, he argued and reasoned with his patients and the laity as to the folly and falsehood of the "isms" of the day in medicine. He was most thorough and clear in his own belief, and never swerved, whatever reputed authority supported this or that pretender or his cause. He detested imposture, in or out of the profession, and was ever ready to lend his aid fearlessly for its exposure. He had an innate respect for true science, and passed no more enjoyable hours than at the meetings of the Thursday Evening Club. His family always looked forward with pleasure to the clear and graphic accounts he gave them at the breakfast-table, the next morning, of what he had seen and heard among his scientific friends.

His religious belief was that of his father, and he was a devoted member of the Protestant Episcopal Church, working with his pastors at old Trinity and St. Paul's. This is not, of course, the place to speak of his long life's work in matters of religion. No man more thoroughly lived up to the warning he gently gave to his professional brethren in his address to them above noticed, when he said, "There is a danger that those engaged in investigating material things should forget the hand which brought them into existence; that while science is pushing its inquiries into the cause and manner of reproduction, and looking through matter for its vital principle, it will forget Him who breathes into it 'the breath of life.' Let us flee this danger by a cherished regard for a divine revelation. Let us labor in our profession with zeal and earnestness, as if success depended only on ourselves; and let us seek the counsel of the Great Physician as if the blessing was alone from Him, without whose aid

'Bethesda's baths would never heal,
Nor Siloam's pool restore.'"